

Read the article and answer the questions listed below.

1. What are the bilateral kinship system and the principle of elder rule?
2. What is the major difference between China and Japan in the ancient time?
3. What is the consequence of bilateral kinship on marriage?
4. What brought the end of the ancient female emperors?
5. Why was there no accession of minors in the 6th-7th centuries?
6. What are the various experiments?
7. Why does the interim theory fail in explaining the alternate accession of male and female emperors in the 6th-8th centuries?
8. What does the long rule by Emperor Suiko suggest?
9. How has the picture changed today?
10. What does the article suggest for the current imperial succession controversy today?

Article

What were the conditions that universally gave rise to female emperors? ①They were bilateral kinship systems and the principle of elder rule. In patrilineal societies, children belong to their father's clan; in matrilineal societies, they belong to their mother's clan. In strict patrilineal societies, those connected through the paternal line share the same surname, and marriage within the clan is prohibited (exogamy / same-surname taboo). Marriage thus serves as a system for creating social ties with other clans.

China was a classic patrilineal society. Only paternal relatives were socially valued, and status was inherited exclusively through the male bloodline (agnatic succession). ②By contrast, in societies based on bilateral kinship, affiliation with the father's or mother's side is more fluid, and bloodlines from both sides play important roles in determining a child's social and political status.

Anthropological research shows that such societies spread from Southeast Asia across the Pacific Rim, including the Japanese archipelago. ③Ancient Wa/Japan was originally a bilateral society. The absence of China-style exogamy or same-surname marriage prohibitions is a major characteristic of Wa/Japanese society (one that continues to the present day). In ancient times, members of the royal family repeatedly engaged in close-kin marriages without distinguishing between paternal and maternal lines. This strengthened clan bonds within a bilateral society and enhanced their authority and power.

However, located on the periphery of the advanced civilization of China and modeling its state formation on China, Wa/Japan introduced the Chinese legal codes known as ritsuryō (律令) as the framework of the state between the late 7th and early 8th centuries. A legal system developed over many years in a patrilineal/agnatic succession society was grafted onto a society with an entirely different kinship principle. This had a profound impact on society as a whole. It directly transformed clan and family consciousness

among officials and views on royal succession, eventually leading to ④the end of the ancient female emperors. Concepts respecting bilateral bloodlines persisted in the subsequent aristocratic society, and among commoners, bilateral kinship retained real significance even under the official patrilineal principle.

Overall, however, Japan gradually became a patrilineal society. In bilateral societies, leaders were male and female elders. It has been clearly established that the great kings/emperors of the 6th–7th centuries ascended the throne at roughly age 40 or older, regardless of gender. ⑤Patrilineal primogeniture inevitably leads to the accession of minors, but 6th–7th century society was not one where such succession occurred. Under an immature state structure, the personal leadership of mature, experienced rulers was an essential requirement for governance. In the late 7th century, for the first time, a 15-year-old boy (Monmu, 文武) ascended the throne under the regency of his grandmother (Jitō, 持統). This was a major shift made possible by the introduction of the ritsuryō state system. Even after abdicating, Jitō continued to co-rule with her grandson, successfully navigating this transition. The system in which an elder woman, after abdicating, supported and nurtured a young male ruler as Retired Emperor (Daijō Tennō, 太上天皇) was established by Jitō.

This enabled the strengthening of monarchical power in the ritsuryō state throughout the 8th century. It represented a soft landing into the newly introduced principle of direct-line succession, built upon the foundation of elder rule in a bilateral society. After female emperors came to an end in the late 8th century, ⑥various experiments followed. A new system—under which young emperors who had ascended through patrilineal direct succession were supported by their mothers (as empress dowagers) and maternal relatives acting as regents—was gradually established from the mid-9th century onward.

From the perspective of research history, until the late 1990s—when the need for kingship studies that did not presuppose sexual difference was proposed—ancient female emperors were viewed as “interim” or “stopgap” figures supporting patrilineal direct

succession. The idea that they were temporarily installed as an emergency measure when normal succession was difficult went unquestioned. However, difficulties in imperial succession occurred repeatedly in later history without necessarily resulting in the enthronement of female emperors. ⑦The historical significance of mature men and women alternately ascending the throne in the 6th–8th centuries, and why this practice ceased after the 9th century, cannot be explained by the “interim” theory.

The “interim” theory itself emerged in the Meiji period, when male-line male succession was legally codified, and became established as scholarly doctrine in the 1960s. Until then, patrilineal direct succession or fraternal succession had been considered Japan’s ancient principle. Today, however, it is the prevailing academic view that the establishment of hereditary kingship itself dates to the period after Keitai and Kinmei in the first half of the 6th century. According to the Nihon Shoki, the first recorded female emperor, Suiko, was the daughter of Kinmei and ascended after three of her brothers. When the principle of hereditary succession became the norm, mature men and women from bilateral bloodlines alternately took the throne. ⑧Even a careful reading of the Nihon Shoki alone makes it clear that Suiko demonstrated outstanding leadership, gained the support of powerful clans, and ascended the throne. Similar detailed studies of the reigns of other female emperors have recently clarified what kind of governance they actually exercised. In the past, female emperors were seen as “nominal” rulers, with real political power held by crown princes or ministers. ⑨Today, however, the picture has changed dramatically.